George F. Will post 3-10-75

An Apostle of Non-Interventionism

A portrait of the late Sen. William E. Borah hangs over the mantle in Sen. Frank Church's Capitol Hill office. The relationship between these two men (they never met) is the closest thing to apostolic succession in American politics.

Borah, an Idaho Republican senator from 1907 until his death in 1940, was chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee in the late '20s. He never went abroad: "One might become merely confused by firsthand information." He was called an isolationist.

Church, an Idaho Democrat, will be chairman of Foreign Relations someday soon. He, too, is called an isolationist but dissents, obliquely, by insisting that Borah was just a non-interventionist.

Borah voted for war in 1917, but was the trumpet of the "irreconcilables" against the League of Nations and World Court, and also opposed repeal of the neutrality acts in the late thirties. He was addicted to the legalisms by which Americans, and especially American legislators, apply to foreign affairs the nation's evangelic faith in litigation.

He was ardently for the Kellogg-Briand pact which, you may remember, outlawed war.

He dissented hard and often against the use of Marines to promote the interests of fruit companies and other businesses in places like Nicaragua. Such were the excesses of the imperial presidencies of Calvin Collidge and others.

Today Church wants the U.S. "off the mainland of Asia," which means, most importantly, out of Thailand and Korea. He says that if we try to "hang on" in Thailand, that will be proof that we have not learned the lesson of Vietnam, and that Secretary of State Kissinger should depart.

He believes that it was a mistake for U.S. forces to cross the 38th parallel in Korea, and that U.S. forces should have been withdrawn from Korea after the armistice. Today, he says, Korea is irrelevant to our vital interests.

Leaving Thailand would involve acknowledging (as Church sees it) that the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) is a nullity. Leaving Korea would involve acting on the provisions for nullifying our treaty with that nation.

By Harry Naltchayan—The Washington Post

"Sen. Frank Church has a doctrine that is suited to the temper of the times."

There is a surface plausibility to this much of Church's argument: The U.S. should not have troops in places where the American public will not countenance the use of American troops. Today Thailand and Korea may be such places.

Church may represent the public mood today, as Borah certainly did in 1920. And Church, at 50, is a rising star. Elected to the Senate in 1956 when he was a cherubic 32-year-old, today only 15 senators (10 Democrats) have more seniority, and their average age is 70.

A senator who wants to specialize in foreign affairs should represent a state like Idaho: population 713,000 (42d), four cities over 25,000 and none over 100,000, population density 8.5 per square mile (45th). His constituents want water and reclamation projects: they don't want gun controls or interference with their methods of dispiining coyotes. His constituents do not require him to spend every waking moment wringing grants from the government.

As ranking Democrat (behind chairman Henry Jackson) on the Interior Committee, Church can look after the interests of his state, two-thirds of which is owned by the federal government. On Foreign Relations, Church ranks behind only Chairman John Sparkman (D-Ala.), 75, and Mike Mansfield (D-Mont.), 72.

In four elections to the Senate, Church has averaged 58 per cent of the vote. Re-elected last year, he now has, as Borah had, a safe seat. That can be, as it was for Borah in his later years, an invitation to a frivolous, merely rhetorical, career.

This danger is especially acute for a senator on Foreign Relations, which under William Fulbright (D-Ark.) became the Senate's most publicized and most ineffectual committee.

The committee has lacked a doctrine and an energetic man to promote it. Church, the apostle, has a doctrine that is suited to the temper of the times and the capabilities of his institution.

Committees and legislatures can only control foreign policy by reducing it to elementary impulses expressed in simple declarations—yes, we declare war; no, we will not fund bombing after Aug. 15; the troops must be out by June 30.

Non-interventionism is a doctrine of withdrawal and abstinence. It can be declared, simply. It may not fit the needs of the nation, but it fits the capabilities of Congress.